

8-12-2009

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Recommended Citation

"Woodstock: So Rare and Fine" (2009). *News Releases*. 1396.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls/1396

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Woodstock: So Rare and Fine

08.12.2009 | Culture and Society, Faculty As a founding member of Sha Na Na, Dennis Greene arrived at the Woodstock stage in a helicopter, flying low over hundreds of thousands of people gathered for the historic concert August 15-18, 1969, and seeing for the first time just how big it had grown.

"You knew it was going to be a big concert music-wise, with some of the top names in the business. But there was no way to forecast it would be the largest rock music audience to date," said Greene, now a University of Dayton law professor. "It was an extraordinary sight to see all

those mountains of people."

When Greene landed, he saw even more extraordinary sights that linger in his memory 40 years after the event.

"It was an amazing sight. There was no food, very little water," he said. "I was shocked at the sharing and the giving I saw everywhere. It was like the Gospel of St. John."

Greene arrived at the three-day concert on Saturday afternoon and was so taken with the ocean of people and the atmosphere of selflessness that he walked through the site, taking it all in.

And then he walked it again, to embed it in his memory.

"The greatest aspect of Woodstock was that it was this one moment – a high plane of concern and giving and sharing for each other," he said. "I walked it a second time because it was so rare and so fine, you just knew it wouldn't come around again."

Greene and Sha Na Na were a hot, new phenomenon, invited to play Woodstock after taking New York City by storm after just two weeks at Steve Paul's Scene, a venue in the city often visited by rock stars like Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin.

Greene had just finished his freshman year at Columbia University and with several other Columbia students had formed an a cappella singing group first called the Columbia Kingsmen. They were an academic singing group, Greene says with a touch of irony: "Like the Whiffenpoofs at Yale." They quickly changed their name to Sha Na Na.

He says they knew they had something special when they started singing oldies at Columbia and discovered the unifying power of 1950s nostalgia as both athletes and hippies greased back their hair and rocked together.

Sha Na Na sparked the 1950s revival and rock and roll stardom with recording contracts, concerts, film and television. Greene performed in the original *Grease* movie with John Travolta and starred in Sha Na Na's television series.

Greene graduated from Columbia University in 1972. He went on to earn a master's degree from Harvard University, a law degree from Yale University and was vice president of production and features at Columbia Pictures. He joined the University of Dayton faculty in 2001 and has taught constitutional law, entertainment law, and race and American law since 2004.

He left the entertainment business 25 years ago and says that until the last few years, his time as "Denny" Greene, a gold-laméd rocker with an honeyed voice and smooth dance moves, was part of a long-distant past.

But YouTube gave "Denny" a second life. Many Sha Na Na performances can be viewed on the Website, including the group's Woodstock performance of *At the Hop*.

"There's always been a paradox of being a rock-and-roll star and a law professor," he said. "But not many people knew it or at least didn't know it right away. Now, students can see the YouTube video and bring that into the classroom." It was recently used as part of his introduction at another law school, where he was invited to make a decidedly more academic presentation.

Now his rock-and-roll incarnation is more accessible and widely known than it has been in a quarter century, he said. "It jumps

into the present in the way it hasn't done in 25 years," he said.

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